

1-2019

## Book review: Chinese and Buddhist philosophy in early twentieth-century German thought by Eric S. Nelson

Steven BURIK

Singapore Management University, STEVENBURIK@smu.edu.sg

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/23801883.2017.1405538>

Follow this and additional works at: [https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soass\\_research](https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soass_research)



Part of the [Religion Commons](#), and the [Theory and Philosophy Commons](#)

---

### Citation

Steven BURIK, .(2019). Book review: Chinese and Buddhist philosophy in early twentieth-century German thought by Eric S. Nelson. *Global Intellectual History*, 4(1), 96-98.

**Available at:** [https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soass\\_research/2406](https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soass_research/2406)

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Social Sciences at Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Research Collection School of Social Sciences by an authorized administrator of Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. For more information, please email [libIR@smu.edu.sg](mailto:libIR@smu.edu.sg).



## BOOK REVIEW

**Chinese and Buddhist philosophy in early twentieth-century German thought**, by Eric S. Nelson, London, Bloomsbury Academic, \$114.00 (hardcover), ISBN: 9781350002562

Eric Nelson has written a very comprehensive study of the reception of Chinese and Eastern Buddhist philosophy in Western thought, with a special focus on the German thinkers of the early twentieth century. Nelson shows great erudition in bringing together a wide variety of thinkers from both East and West, including importantly some lesser known, but very relevant thinkers from both the Western tradition and Eastern philosophy. Although Nelson focuses mostly on the encounters and interactions between German philosophers and Chinese thinkers, his aim with this commendable book is wider. Nelson employs the encounters between German and Chinese thinkers in the wider context of comparative and/or intercultural philosophy, and his aim is therefore stated as being an attempt to consider 'whether a more nuanced and historically appropriate conception of philosophy can emerge through critically engaging and reflecting on the modern encounter between Western and non-Western philosophy, and articulating its intercultural and intertextual dynamics' (11–12).

As so many of us comparative or intercultural philosophers, Nelson sees the need to expand the notion of philosophy from its narrow confines of Western rationality and metaphysics. In the chapters of this book he uses the various case studies of encounters between Western and Eastern thinkers to espouse what intercultural philosophy (and therefore philosophy in general) should be. In Chapter 1 the mixed batch of positive and negative receptions of Confucius in German thought is examined through such thinkers as Rosenzweig, Misch, and Buber amongst others. In Chapter 2 the figure of Zhang Dumai is discussed, who adopted both (Neo-) Confucian visions and the life-philosophy of the German thinkers Eucken and Driesch in an attempt to negotiate the Westernization of thinking in China with the perceived merits of Confucian thought. In Chapter 3 the issue of 'resentment' is discussed through the figures of Nietzsche, Scheler, and Confucius, and Nelson argues that an approach through Confucian ethics to this problem provides an illuminating alternative well worth considering. In Chapter 4 the focus is switched to the reception and appropriation of Daoism in early twentieth-century Germany, discussing amongst others primarily Heidegger and Buber. Nelson here shows how a range of key philosophical ideas of both thinkers were informed by the figures of Laozi and Zhuangzi. Chapter 5 turns the discussion towards the origins of philosophy. By exploring how Heidegger, Dilthey, and Misch interpret the very idea and origin of philosophy, Nelson comes to the conclusion that there is a camp which considers philosophy to be a largely Western enterprise from a Western starting point, but there is also a camp in German thought which, although in flawed ways, argues for a more pluralistic conception of the origins of philosophy, and is thereby more conducive to intercultural philosophy.

In Chapters 6–8 Nelson turns his attention to (mostly East-Asian) Buddhism. Chapter 6, building on the previous chapter, discusses how although Husserl and Heidegger had some promising engagements with East-Asian Buddhism, their perceptions on and limitations of what philosophy is has hindered a full development of such engagements. Chapter 7 again discusses Buber and Heidegger, this time in light of Buber's idea that the West can learn from the East, and specifically from East-Asian Buddhism. The discussion here focuses on how such learning from the East might be perceived by Buber and Heidegger, and emphasizes

specifically the predicaments of Western technological modernity, which both Buber and Heidegger identified as areas where Eastern thought in general, and Chan/Zen Buddhism in particular, might provide resources for the alleviation of such predicaments. In the last chapter of this book, the Chan Buddhist notion of emptiness is compared to Heidegger's Nothing. Nelson here discusses how both notions, although in different ways, 'indicate strategies of self-transformation within the worldly immanence of everyday life through employing the perplexing and transformative language of emptiness and nothingness' (22).

As can be glanced from this description of the chapters, in which I have not even mentioned all the thinkers that Nelson discusses, this book is commendable for its vast erudition. Just mentioning the names of the thinkers that Nelson discusses would make this review intolerably long. Nelson has done the discipline of comparative and/or intercultural philosophy a huge service by not limiting his discussions to the most well-known figures, but by enlarging the discourse through his elucidations of the many and diverse figures who have played a role in shaping comparative and intercultural philosophy into the discipline it is today.

Although the topic is discussed in various places throughout the book, in the conclusion Nelson comes back to the idea of intercultural philosophy. He argues that a contemporary hermeneutical approach to intercultural philosophy is needed that would realize that intercultural encounters have happened and continue to happen and that such encounters need to move away from ideas of inferiority or superiority. This obviously entails a critique of Eurocentric notions of what philosophy is or should be, and Nelson argues that a recognition of the inherent rationality and potential for philosophical reflection in other cultures is still badly needed, although that recognition should not lead us into a shallow relativism.

While there is a lot to commend about this book, I do wish to point out certain minor areas that I find problematic. Sometimes Nelson seems to be overplaying his cards or overgeneralizing or simplifying matters. It may be that such is a necessary feature of a work that covers so many different thinkers, but it should be addressed anyway. I will therefore highlight two instances. The first is in the chapter on 'resentment.' While Nelson does an admirable job in nuancing Nietzsche's ideas on resentment and *ressentiment*, he then goes on to argue that the Confucian asymmetrical relationality is in fact a better way of dealing with the negative emotions of resentment. But the question that is not answered here is whether it is not in fact the asymmetry in the first place that is the cause for resentment, as it may well be that the demand of prioritization of the 'other' in the self-development of the Confucian ethics is at least part of the cause of resentment, rather than its cure as suggested by Nelson. Although Nelson may be right in suggesting that Confucian ethics provide an alternative approach to Western social theories of resentment in urging the moral person to stand above resentment through a prioritization of the standpoint of the other, this does little to establish why such an alternative would be better in dealing with the negative effects of resentment or *ressentiment*. In fact, one could easily argue that (as Nelson indeed points out) resentment plays a vital role and that the Confucian system's negation or negotiation of it leads to more negative social outcomes than positive. Confucian ethics in this sense seems no more 'realistic' or 'nuanced' than other systems. The fact that it needs no recourse to a transcendental principle may make it preferable to systems that do, but there are many contemporary Western systems that also do not see the need for such recourse. More importantly, although Nelson discusses the asymmetry of the ethical claim upon a person, in the sense of not expecting from others what one does expect from oneself, he does not discuss in any detail the asymmetry of the roles that make up the backbone of Confucian ethics, and it might well be these five relationships themselves and their asymmetrical demands that require a justified resentment. And this may have been Nietzsche's real concern.

My second concern is in Chapter 5, where Nelson discusses Heidegger in the context of what does and does not count as 'philosophy.' Here I find Nelson not adequately portraying

Heidegger, who is said to deny 'philosophy' to the East. The 'Asiatic' mentioned on page 145 is clearly for Heidegger not the East-Asian, but Asia Minor and specifically refers to the Persian threats that Ancient Greece had to 'confront.' This is really all about what 'philosophy' is. When G. E. Moore pointed to the wall of books behind him and said philosophy was 'what these are about,' he referred to an entire history of thinking with its own categories, demands, and interests. In my opinion it is this history that Heidegger calls 'philosophy,' and it is exactly those categories and that history that he then continues to question. In that sense it is a one-sided strategy to put Heidegger away as denying philosophy to the East. He does, but he denies it that specific history and warns it against reducing its own history to the 'Begriffe' of the West. Whether you call other ways of thinking 'philosophy' or not then just becomes a question of definition. It is one-sided to put Heidegger into the camp of those denying that there is anything of interest in the thoughts of non-Western traditions. And it is one-sided to not mention in this chapter that Heidegger speaks of the possibility of there being 'greater thinkers' outside the West, or not to mention that Heidegger seeks to overcome what he calls philosophy. One has only to think of 'The end of philosophy and the task of thinking,' or the positive connotations that identifying Eastern thought as 'poetic thinking' definitely has for Heidegger. Nelson does, throughout the book, speak of Heidegger as at least having had some merit in the field of intercultural philosophy, but this section of Chapter 5 is unfairly negative in suggesting that Heidegger, Derrida, and Rorty are Eurocentric. If anything, their work has contributed tremendously to opening up philosophy to its other in many different ways, but these thinkers have done so (1) in the acknowledgement that philosophy can only do this by going back on and interrogating its own origins and dominant history; (2) by warning against superficial remedies that would amount to taking over 'Asian' ways, or in the other direction taking over Western conceptuality; and (3) by highlighting that the term 'philosophy' is used by them exactly to define and then condemn the isolatedness and limitations of Western style thinking. Nelson's depiction here is too black and white. But this is in the context of the ongoing debate on whether there is such a thing as non-Western philosophy, which in my opinion is largely a definitional and political debate, and not a philosophical one. Define philosophy as the history and accompanying conceptuality of Western thought, and then other ways of thinking may indeed not fit that bill. Define it in broader terms as a kind of questioning and reflection, then they may be included. It may well be, as Nelson argues, that the second kind of definition is a better reflection of current needs and reality. But calling Heidegger, Derrida, and Rorty Eurocentric because they employ the first definition exactly in order to overcome the limitations inherent in the dominant approach in Western thinking risks not portraying them correctly.

Maybe the two examples I have given in this otherwise outstanding book are reflective of an overall noble as well as justifiable cause: to broaden the scope of philosophy to include other ways of thinking. Yet we need to be careful in the claims we make in pursuing this cause. Nelson's *Chinese and Buddhist Philosophy in Early Twentieth-Century German Thought* is a great example of a book that shows us how such broadening has already taken place over centuries of engagement, and of how we may perceive of intercultural philosophy moving forward.